

D'Agostino Progression Preamplifier/Stereo

Inspired by the 'Momentum' circuit and industrial design that put D'Agostino Master Audio Systems on the map, its Progression series could make the biggest impact yet
 Review: **José Victor Henriques Lab: Paul Miller**

The Progression Stereo amplifier is built around a dual-wound 1400VA toroidal transformer coupled to 400,000µF of power supply storage capacitance that feeds no fewer than 48 power transistors – 24 per channel. On paper this is said to generate 300W/8ohm, doubling into 4ohm [see PM's Lab Report p37]. And it's yours for roughly half the price of a pair of the company's Progression Monoblocks [HFN Jun '17].

Unsurprisingly, such monumental output power generates a good deal of heat that requires dissipation. As in the Momentum models, CEO Dan D'Agostino's solution is a series of venturi-style circular 'chimneys' found either side of the amp. These are milled from a single 22kg aluminium slab, the material being more affordable than the rose copper used for the Momentum series, so helping to keep down costs.

GOING GREEN

The Swiss watch-inspired green illuminated power meter that now adorns all the company's preamps and amplifiers is retained, serving not only to differentiate the components from the competition – as the Krell blue LEDs once did for Dan's first company – but to echo the brand's green credentials. He believes that 'the audio industry should do its part to conserve energy and help preserve our environment'. Remember those energy-hungry, fan-cooled Krell Class A amplifiers of yesteryear? Today's Progression amplifiers are said to consume less than one watt of power at idle, though PM's lab tests indicated otherwise of course!

Dan has remained faithful to the fully balanced operation that was core to his

RIGHT: For an ostensibly 'minimalist' preamp, this is a complex multi-transistor design. Foam damping squeezes the main PCB up against the lid while the vacant space [left] will accommodate an optional USB DAC module

Krell amplifier designs, aided in this new era by a 'Super Rail' that he likens to a turbo in a car engine, 'boosting' the output of the Progression Stereo by utilising higher voltage in the prior gain stages.

From a distance you cannot tell the Progression Mono and Stereo power amplifiers apart. They are equally imposing with the same 457x190x508mm (whd) dimensions and, at 57kg, they are equally back-breaking.

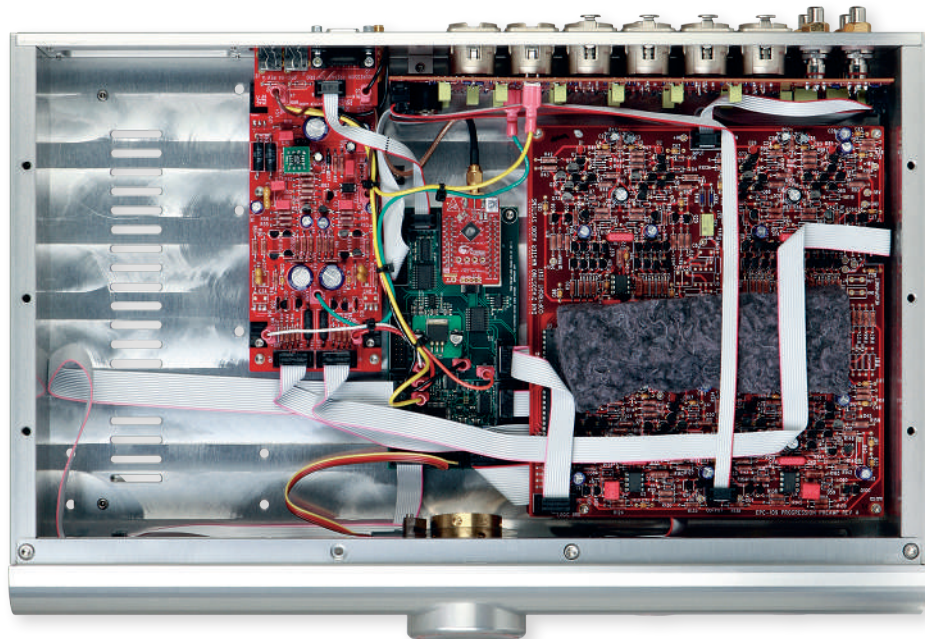
Only their power outputs differ, the Mono said to offer 500W/8ohm courtesy of the 'two' internal amplifiers operating as one bridged monoblock. Of course, the Progression Stereo power meter sports *two* swing arm needles in order to cover the output of both channels. And, of course, there are two balanced XLR inputs and two sets of gold-plated 4mm speaker binding posts.

'The Monos surf soundwaves on skis, the Stereo on a snowboard'

Nothing else separates them at birth. They share the same clean fascia, dominated by that copper-green meter and have a power button hidden at the front underside edge. On the rear panel of both amps can be found a 12V on/off trigger connection, a toggle to set the meter brightness, a main breaker switch and the AC power connector.

I find the Progression amplifiers more appealing visually – and acoustically – than the Momentum models, and might be the only one

who dares say it (though I have not listened to the Momentum M400 monoblock yet, reviewed in HFN Oct '16). Which either makes this Progression Stereo a high-end 'bargain', or I risk making a fool of myself. To my mind they are just the right size and look even more purposeful – or should that be macho?



While we are on the subject of styling, the Momentum Preamp's 'watch' necessarily protrudes because it includes a peripheral ring that spins into action [HFN Nov '13]. But to some eyes this might not integrate so well with the amp's overall cosmetics – looking like an add-on – while those rose copper heatsinks might also strike as a tad too feminine for our typically testosterone-driven audiophile tastes.

THE GREAT DEBATE

The Progression Preamp was a tougher assignment for designer Dan. It's not easy to challenge the Momentum Preamp – a work of art that's hard to beat at any price. Personally, I love the design so much I could settle for the identical-looking Integrated [HFN Dec '14] and forget all about the Momentum/Progression debate. Or else, go for the Momentum Preamp/Progression Stereo as an alternative to the Progression Preamp/Mono power amps. The price for both combinations is very similar, at around £72k.

For 50% of the price of the Momentum Preamp, the Progression Preamp yields 90% of the performance and far more than a mere sniff of the former's beauty. What's more, the Progression Preamp is the first

of the company's offerings to feature an optional DAC module that will set you back another £5000. The preamp also includes a Bluetooth remote handset that does not require line-of-sight to operate [see p37].

The Progression Preamp also features two multi-function meters (one per channel) that indicate signal level by default and gain and balance settings by selection. They also indicate inverted polarity, turning from green to red when you press the Polarity button on the remote; Mute, by alternating between green and white; or 'Dark Mode' by blanking out after 15 seconds.

The centrally placed volume knob, much more discreet than the Momentum's, controls a precision-stepped attenuator that emits small clicks as you change the settings. A gain adjustment of +9dB or +15dB is also available, the latter to be used with low-gain power amplifiers. To the left of the front panel you can find the Standby, Zone, Analogue and Digital Source buttons. The latter's LED indicators will only light if the DAC module is installed.

The slim chassis of the Progression Preamp is at least partially achieved by separating out its power supply into a convenient 'base', the two located via four

ABOVE: Recognisably 'D'Agostino' if a subdued version of the Momentum Preamp's industrial design. Volume is governed by relay-switched attenuators while meters indicate signal level

spiked feet and connected via a supplied umbilical cable. The rear panel is otherwise rather busy with single-ended RCA inputs for Phono and Aux, and balanced XLRs labelled Theatre (bypass), Radio, Server and DAC. Two balanced XLR outputs are offered as 'Zone 1 and 2' while a plate covers the bay where the optional USB and S/PDIF DAC module may be installed.

MAGICAL REALISM

The Progression Preamp/Stereo joined a pair of Wilson Audio Alexia Series 2 loudspeakers [HFN Mar '18] for the listening, with a dCS Vivaldi One media player [HFN Feb '18] and Rossini DAC as digital sources. Transparent Opus cabling was used throughout while a Momentum Preamp and Progression monoblocks were on hand as a memory 'refresher'.

I began with the Vivaldi One driving the Progression Stereo directly, only to be presented with a flat and rather pedestrian sound. It was only when I installed the Progression Preamp that the magic was revealed. Now the sound was infused with a tube-like bass bloom without any loss of lucidity, the pairing revealing the purpose, drama and sheer vitality of the music. In short, I was flabbergasted.

It was like using the luminosity slider in a photo-editing software package to banish noise that lurks in the shadows of a digital image. Less noise means greater dynamics not to mention a more convincing see-through presentation, the sounds emerging clearly against a pitch-black canvas.

The Progression Stereo drove the Alexia Series 2 effortlessly, and I was greeted with the same tonality, harmonic richness and differentiation of timbres as when I heard the speakers hooked up to the Progression

A MATTER OF STYLE

After three decades with Krell Industries, 2011 saw high-end designer Dan D'Agostino start a new company from scratch, under his own name, and introducing a major shift in style. The Master Audio Systems aesthetic is so different from Krell's that one can only speculate if, by way of prescience, Dan had kept some of his best ideas for a rainy day. Ideas so personal that now he puts his name on the front and a signature on the meter(s). Unfortunate things have a way of happening for a good reason. Revisions and refinements occur in every artist's process. But Dan changed his style beyond recognition, although he kept the substance and did not renounce power as the foundation of good sound. For someone who designed the 350kg Master Reference Mono Amplifier for the biggest, 'baddest' guy on the block, Dan has become surprisingly sensitive to the so-called 'wife acceptance factor'. Which is no bad thing if it helps sell the idea of high-end audio to the better half of humanity.



ABOVE/BELOW: The sensitivity and brightness of the meter is adjustable while, inside the massive alloy carcass [below], a similarly massive toroidal transformer feeds separate PSUs for the 12 pairs of high-current bipolar Sanken transistors that comprise each left and right channel amp

monoblocks. The family resemblance is not just cosmetic. Both amps share the same 'voicing' and there's no apparent lack of power or curtailing of dynamics. The Monos surf the soundwaves on a pair of skis, while the Stereo uses a snowboard, but they are both very 'fast'.

EMOTIONAL FEAST

To feel the pulse of the system I played the tracks I had used to test both the Progression Monos and Alexia S2 in these pages, and only then introduced new music, starting with London Grammar's electronic pop debut album *If You Wait* [UM 0602537613120].

Both the title song and the opening track 'Hey Now' are heavy on digital reverb, conveying a feeling of ethereal spaciousness with weeping electric guitars, languorous keyboards and vicious bass

lines. Hannah Reid's voice is both powerful and filled with emotional urgency. The Progression combo feasted on this atmospheric ride, taking advantage of the time cues laid bare by the Alexia Series 2 and delivering all the air that the music needed to breathe.

The Progression duo pulled the same neat trick with natural reverb. Kim André Arnesen's *Magnificat* [2L-106-SABD] was recorded in Nidaros Cathedral, Norway, by Nidaros Girl's Choir, with soprano Lise Granden Berg. The sound was captured in 3D by a vast omnidirectional tree-array of microphones hanging some three metres above and in front of the strings and choir. I used the DXD stereo master (352.8kHz/24-bit) download.

The Progression Preamp/Stereo managed to convey not only the supreme beauty of the girls' voices echoing and

DAN D'AGOSTINO

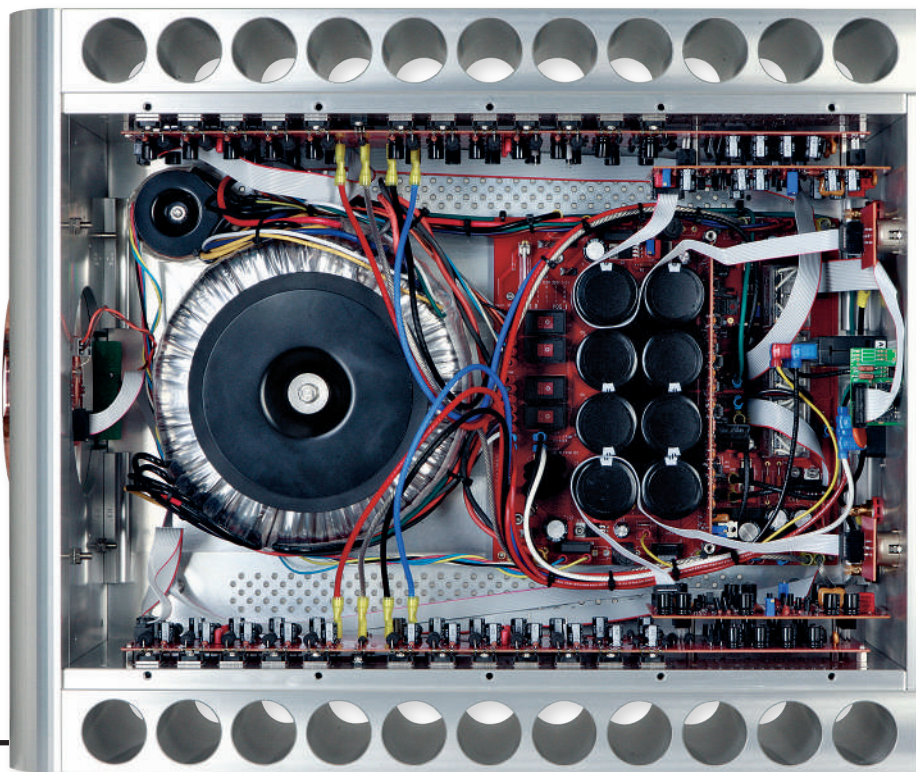
'I was not thinking about the Progression circuitry while working at Krell,' confirmed Dan to *HFN*, 'indeed, all our DDMAS amplifiers are new designs with the Progression deriving much of its inspiration from the earlier Momentum series.'

So what can audiophiles expect when comparing the flagship Momentum Preamp with this Progression version or the Progression Monos with the Stereo? 'For the Momentum Preamp we aimed for a very large and exciting presence, a wide and deep soundstage with a visceral impact. The Progression has these qualities but just scaled down a bit – tonally, they are very similar.'

'The same goes between the Progression Mono and Stereo. Structurally, they are nearly identical but dedicating the entire power supply to an individual channel, along with its companion circuitry, makes for a grand presentation. I've always found it tough for a stereo amp to compete with a monoblock based on a similar design.'

Did the 'cutting' of size and price compromise the sound quality in any significant way? 'The Progression series was designed with the idea that the host hi-fi system would not have the resolving capability of one that included the Momentum. This allowed us to make decisions where we could reduce the overall cost.'

What is next for D'Agostino? 'As of right now, we are fully immersed in our new reference series, called the "Relentless", which we will unveil at the Munich Show in May.'



www.hifinews.co.uk | Reprinted from Hi-Fi News



ABOVE: The Preamplifier sits atop a heavily screened PSU [top] and offers four balanced line ins (on XLRs), one phono and line in on RCAs, and two balanced outs (on XLRs). The Stereo hosts balanced inputs and 4mm speaker binding post outputs

decaying naturally in the gothic cathedral but also the soprano's moving spirituality, shining through the Alexia S2 with such religious emotion it could convert the devil himself. I certainly became a believer – if only in the Progression Preamp/Stereo amps.

DARK STARS

Back to Earth – and sin – and next up was 'You Want It Darker' from Leonard Cohen's poignant final album of the same name [Columbia 0889853650729]. The Progressions delivered all the contrast between Cohen's half-spoken, whispered grumble and the humming male choir and backing female vocals, while the dark, subterranean beat drove the song with a funereal pace towards its inexorable end: 'I'm ready, my Lord'.

But I was not ready yet. I just needed something more uplifting. My hand reached for Keb Mo's *Peace, Back By Popular Demand* [Sony 0886977026027]. I had been lucky enough to hear Keb Mo live in a private concert in New York, back

in 2002. The kick drum sounded just as tight, the bass as articulate and Mo's low-key vocals as present as I can remember, making the Stephen Stills' song 'For What It's Worth' almost danceable with its soul-jazz and funky adornments.

'Wake Up Everybody', the track that follows, is a peaceful call to arms: 'All we have to do is put our heads and hearts together'. And the Progressions did put everything together. Bass and kick drum were as much rhythmically intertwined as they were differentiated in timbre. Meanwhile, the backup vocals and funky horns drew a tapestry against which Mo's voice and percussionist's strikes stood out clearly amid the colourful embroideries of guitars and keyboards. ☺

HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

While it's true that I began with a bias for the Momentum Preamp/Progression Mono combination, the Progression Preamp/Stereo duo, offering half the power for half the money, also gave me 'the whole of the moon'. If I had to choose, I wouldn't hesitate a moment(um). While clearly still expensive for many, this combo represents a true bargain and in my book the performance is more than enough to warrant the price.

Sound Quality: 90%

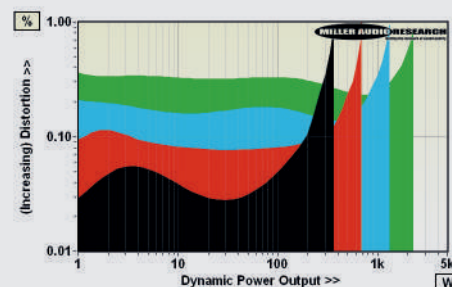
0 - - - - - 100



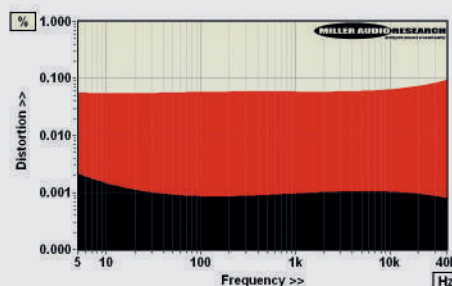
D'AGOSTINO PROG. PRE/STEREO

While our inside shot [p32] reveals clear differences in the design of this Progression Preamp versus the more sophisticated Momentum Preamp [HFN Nov '13], there are still clear parallels in their engineering targets. For example, the Progression Preamp has the same extended response (within ± 0.1 dB out to 100kHz) and there's also that broad subsonic bass boost amounting to +0.45dB/20Hz and +0.95dB/5Hz. Distortion remains impressively consistent with frequency but is even lower here from 0.00065-0.00085% (Momentum) to 0.0005-0.0007% (Progression) across 20Hz-20kHz (0dBV). Overall gain is about 1.7dB higher at +9.8dB and the overall A-wtd S/N ratio wider still at 99.5dB (vs. 96.0dB) re. 0dBV.

The partnering Progression Stereo is significantly beefier than the Momentum Stereo [HFN Aug '12], behaving like a 'half power' version of the (bridged) Progression Mono [HFN Jun '17]. Its 300W/600W 8/4ohm power rating works out as 2x325W and 2x575W in practice although that massive PSU will sustain peaks of 365W, 690W, 1.33kW and 2.29kW into 8, 4, 2 and 1ohm loads under dynamic conditions at <1% THD [see Graph 1, below]. Like other D'Agostino power amps, the Progression Stereo is neither super-quiet (the A-wtd S/N is just under 80dB re. 0dBW) nor very low in distortion. Of more importance, arguably, is the control exercised over this distortion – held between 0.02-0.07% from 1-100W through the midrange and a similarly consistent 0.04-0.07% over the full (20Hz-20kHz) audio band [see red trace, Graph 2]. Output impedance is held to 0.17ohm from 20Hz-10kHz and the response flat from near-DC to -0.12dB/20kHz and -1.6dB/100kHz. PM



ABOVE: Dynamic power output versus distortion into 8ohm (black trace), 4ohm (red), 2ohm (blue) and 1ohm (green) speaker loads. Maximum current 47.9A



ABOVE: THD vs. extended freq for Progression Preamp (1V out, black trace) vs. Stereo (10W/8ohm, red)

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Power output (<1% THD, 8/4ohm)	325W / 575W
Dynamic power (<1% THD, 8/4/2/1ohm)	365W / 690W / 1325W / 2290W
Output imp. (20Hz-20kHz, pre/power)	39ohm / 0.17-0.19ohm
Freq. resp. (20Hz-100kHz, pre/power)	+0.45 to -0.13dB / +0.0 to -1.6dB
Input sensitivity (for 0dBV/0dBW)	322mV (pre) / 181mV (power)
A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 0dBV/0dBW)	99.5dB (pre) / 79.6dB (power)
Distortion (20Hz-20kHz, 1V/10W)	0.0005-0.0007%/0.040-0.071%
Power consump. (pre/idle/rated o/p)	33W / 113W/970W
Dimensions (WHD, Pre/Power)	450x108x300/457x190x508mm